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Bobbie Ann Mason Challenges the Myth of Southernness: Postmodern Identities, Blurring Borders and Literary Labels

Candela Delgado Marin

The Blurring South of Postmodernity

1 Bobbie Ann Mason sets most of her short fiction in the southern state of Kentucky. She is considered as a southern writer. In fact, she was added this year to the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame ("KY Writers Hall of Fame"), as a sign of her regional recognition. Even when her fiction departs from the South, her homeland still performs a defining role in her language and characters. However, place and identity have become mythical notions in postmodern times. The self is built upon stories; and the location of the self in a cultural space is understood through stories as well. The stories ingrained in the myths of the South resist being fully erased by the flow of globalized communications, but they have, nevertheless, been affected by the chaotic nature of the postmodern psyche. Southerners, hence, still perceive the effects of their border culture but southern stories of postmodern regional identity and landscape contain interferences. These alien elements have been greeted with both satisfaction and suspicion. The image of a South that is no longer isolated has found its way into the stories, or myths of these states, providing their social, political and cultural tales with ingredients from identities and places from the other side of the border.

2 Text-makers interpret those around them and the land as stories. Contemporary southern writers, like Bobbie Ann Mason, report on the metamorphosis of the region, working on the dividing line between North and South as a fictitious space that has been partially devoid of all the meanings it had been instilled with. The southerners of postmodernity can act as revisionists of the mythical load carried by the region—and

part of that weight is put on by the concept of demarcation lines. Stanley J. Grenz, in a study of postmodernism in literature, explains the current fragility of uniformity: "The demise of the ground narrative means that we no longer search for the one system of myths that can unite human beings into one people or the globe into one world" (45). Similarly, the South is no longer a cultural block, and neither is the North. Border culture has changed and it is now a complex myth of ever-changing symbols. However, I want to emphasize the intrinsic trait of "borderland" of Kentucky in particular. From the Civil War to the present, Kentucky has been considered a border state.[1] This region, as a source of inspiration, facilitates the blurring of absolutes. And these concepts of liminality and fluidity between sides of a barrier are the foundation of my discussion of Bobbie Ann Mason's questioning of southern identity, of the regionalist short story genre and of literary labels such as postmodernism and dirty realism.

3 It is a struggle to define the concept of "southernness" because this regional identity has undergone drastic changes, but is still tethered to its original cultural uniqueness. This part of the country has developed, maintaining a tension between frantic constant changes and an ingrained attachment to their cultural differentiators. The South has changed in tangible matters, for instance with the alteration of the landscape, with industrialization; and, as well, in impalpable aspects that are, nevertheless, extremely perceptible—to name a few: the drastic reframing of social conscience, the gradual integration of globalized cultural references, or the modulation of strong local accents towards the more standard. The pre-bellum cruelty and the damage left by the war have unavoidably complicated the organic establishment of a unified southern identity. Literary texts have tried to either construct collective definitions of what being from the South means or, conversely, to underline the elusive nature of southerners as a cultural type. In both cases, however, the arguments are built based on the opposition with the North. Nevertheless, attempting to provide a final definition of this opposition would be a shallow sociological consideration, because as Scott Romine explains: "rarely [...] does space acquire coherence or integration" (177). Borders are unfixable beyond maps.

4 In an interview in 1995, Chicano scholar Gloria Anzaldúa describes how the fluidity of borders may produce wounded subjects: "[w]hen you are in this transition space, [...] there's nothing firm that you can grasp, not even your past memories because you are re-interpreting them and in re-interpreting them you are changing the past" (Urch 78). The flux of alien cultural artifacts, tales, and words triggers a fear of depersonalization and creates a complex relation with nostalgia because the past becomes unseizable and yet extremely necessary. David Anderson in his study of southern nostalgia accounts for the effect memory has on perception: "Rather than remembering precisely what was, we tend to make the past comprehensible in relation to the present conditions of the here and now" (107). Thus, if southerners organize their consciousness of past and present based on a mutable reality, the resulting literature will reflect this state of confusion and scatteration.

5 Consequently, the evolution of the narratives of the South is an example of stories that grow along with changes in cartography. That is, the complexity of southern myths reflects the modifications of the political and historical borders of the region. But, as Louis D. Rubin Jr. explained in his 1991 study of southernness: "[W]hatever the complexity of the ingredients that go to make it [a shared identity] up, it works in direct and palpable ways to cause its members to identify their concerns with those of a

particular social and cultural allegiance" (17). Thus, southernness might be a mythology, but it becomes physical, perceptible, in the intricacies and contradictions of southern language and stories, where people can find a sense of belonging.

6 Therefore, even from a skeptical perspective, the southern myths may still be employed as a soothing element, providing common ground for members of the disintegrated South. In fact, Bobbie Ann Mason's characters are aware of the myths of the South, but they have a complicated relationship with them; that is why some want to leave the South behind, and others fight to stay but even the latter tend to be restless. In her story "Residents and Transients," Stephen tries to convince his wife Mary of leaving her family's farmhouse in rural Kentucky but she resists. However, she had previously lived in the North for a long time and only came back to take care of her sick parents. Now she is strongly attached to the land, mentioning her need to be able to see those "cornfields". And yet, Mary is herself a stranger in her homeland: "I'm very much an outsider myself, though I've tried to fit in since I've been back" (118-19). This complicated conceptualization of nostalgia and regional identity sources many of the plots of Mason's stories. In fact, the writer herself reflects in the following way on the sense of place: "I think dislocation is a dizzying reality, full of possibility [...]. If the writer can use his or her craft and imagination to pull off the illusions of a place we can believe is real, then we feel like we've really been somewhere" ("Sense of Place" 224). That is, by drawing characters that struggle with the sense of belonging, and choosing settings that are in constant change, she actually depicts more believable southern places that reflect the multifaceted and permutable postmodern southern myths. Furthermore, her stories depict the myths while acknowledging that her literature is in itself also a myth because it is a narrative of a "dislocated" region. However, the South remains Mason's creative stimulus, because, nevertheless, and regardless of its artifice nature, it is still useful to create an "illusion" of southernness as a tool to achieve the aforementioned sense of place.

7 Thus, Bobbie Ann Mason's characters acknowledge the crumbling state of any inherited imagery. In the South she portrays, where culture leaks into and permeates North and South and *vice versa*, characters perceive southernness as a fabrication. That is why her insight into local identity, notwithstanding her life experience in the North, eventually turned into her main inspiration, an inspiration to fabricate, to write fiction: "writing has been a response to a world that is rich in material even though bounded by farm fences" ("Reading Between the Lines" 2014). Myth is associated with fictitious and false representations, which are useful literary triggers. That is, Mason recognizes the limits of the South and its suffocating effect, together with the South's potential to be a fruitful seed of creativity. This is in itself a paradox: the South as a place that simultaneously puts limits, "fences", to inspiration, while feeding the imagination with its "rich material". In postmodernism, realism struggles with incoherence, paradoxes and delusion.

8 The South where Mason's characters evolve is involved in constant reproductions: recreations of nostalgia, products of popular culture and copies of original folklore. Mark S. Graybill in an analysis of Mason's postmodern fictional identities states that the writer immerses her characters in "the pervasive simulacra of American society" (243). This is the essence of postmodernity according to Fredric Jameson and his analysis of such a context and the corresponding consumerist society, where "the emergence of new formal features in culture" correlates with "a new type of social life

and a new economic order" (3). That is, a postmodern society moves from mass-production and compulsive consumption of products to a mass production of culture, resulting in an induced necessity to consume new reproductions of cultural identities.

9 The globalized Kentucky that concerns Mason forces her characters to face altered places (big malls, smoky factories, shrinking farms, or expanding subdivisions) that unsettle previous learnt interactions with the world. Change is both exciting and threatening in her stories and the following image from "New Ground" (1983) conveys this: "[Ivaline, an elderly farmer, works the land around the family home and looks beyond their lake and fields:] Beyond the pastures, a smokestack from the industrial park is making a curlicue of smoke in the sky" (31). Mason describes pollution as a decorative curl to emphasize the apparent inoffensive nature of the fumes, but the spiral shape proceeds aimlessly and as a hazard, approaching their farm. The factory seems to appear out of smoke, as if it were the result of magic tricks—a sudden presence, instead of a gradual change–, portraying a sense of the unreal. In this manner, Mason inserts within the postmodern context of transformation of the rural South, the stereotype of the southern farmer passive in the face of invasive progress.

10 Consequently, past and present are in constant dialogue in the postmodern South, incapable of being able to disentangle themselves completely from each other. The landscapes, or stages evoked by Mason, depict a South where silhouettes from the fading South and the emerging South come into contact and, at times, merge. For instance, in the story "Spence + Lila," Spence burns trash in the fields of his farm, behind the building that used to be their milkhouse, now long gone: "The cloud of black smoke blows south, toward the smokestack of the industrial park. Spence likes that [...] he's sending the park a message" (95). Again, the symbol of the smoke links the old and the new South in a cloud of postmodernity—a blurry space where tradition and progress collide. The acceptance of the semantic complexity of a South in permanent transition entails constant rumination on memory and history. But, "[i]f a subjective, sensory event in the past can be recaptured, by dint of being reinvoked by a similar experience in the present, two separate moments in time are joined. The individual consciousness is thereby liberated from chronology and, however briefly, can exist free of its limitations" (Rubin, *Southern Cross* 19). Spence can see the cloud of smoke, smell the materials in flames, and feel the heat of the fire. This is an action that he has probably performed before the cornfields were taken over by factories. Thus, through his body and senses, past and present fuse in his mind. Inherited furniture has a similar effect on Sandra in the story "The Funeral Side": "Sandra studied the furniture, ... Was there a time in life when one's forebears suddenly insisted on being acknowledged?" (138). The pieces of furniture impersonate the materialization of her family tree, imposing the presence of ancestry in the immediate. This is the permanent coexistence of past and present, of claustrophobia caused by the ever-present local color, which is simultaneously and paradoxically also appreciated. Another illustration of this would be crafts for the narrator and character Bill in "Window Lights." This man, after his separation from his wife, takes on quilting, acting out the skills of his deceased mother. He presents a male interpretation of one of the main symbols of the traditional South. The artistic project leads him to the following conclusion: "I sit in my easy chair in front of the television and write in my journal. My insight of the Day: To avoid the trap of history, you've got to knowingly reenact it, go with it right up to the edge, then pull back" (148). This man embraces the myth of the quilt but reconstructs it because he is inverting gender roles. In this story, the man sews the pieces of the family inheritance

together in this quilt, adapting the myth in order to make it functional within the current reality. And yet, he reenacts his mother, by speaking like her, remembering her, and sewing like her. Bill's mother is just a memory now, but he brings her back to the present, converging the old and the new South.

11 In these temporal intersections Mason chooses for her story plots, characters who experience a permanent sense of tug-of-war with the South. As an illustration, Nancy in the story "The Prelude" says that: "Kentucky wouldn't release her. She wouldn't let it. She fought Jack [her husband] on this, and he always accused her of being held back by her culture" (217). Thus, characters may feel trapped by the South, but, at the same time, like Nancy, they can trap the South within them. The inability to forever leave the South behind forces the characters to often restrict their journeys to individual reveries, which would represent the only option to undergo a rite of passage that may free them from the southern frontier burden, without actually having to cross it; because "[m]aybe you can't get to the South from here-and-now ever again, 'here' being the postsouthern position of infinite (or almost infinite) simulacra" (Kreyling 194). The myth of the South is being rapidly and constantly reconstructed on a base of representations that are weak as referents due to their distance from the original sources. Barbara in the "The Secret of the Pyramids" drives at night and sees how: "Paducah's first mall, now called the 'price-down mall,' seemed forlorn, like an abandoned movie set" (70). That is, a pure scenario with props to perform the regionalism of a South that has melted away.

12 Consequently, the characters become either metaphor projectors or tropes in themselves—actors that perform the South or just an element on the "set" of southernness. In one of Mason's latest stories, "The Horsehair Ball Gown" (2013), two elderly sisters refuse to accept the changes undergone by Kentucky. They enjoy the "old-time atmosphere" of their regular coffee stop, as if it were a scene in a cinematic production from past times. The pervading mood of this space imports a fake sense of stability. However, the café is nothing but a metaphor, a symbol of the South they refuse to forget. Similarly, the two sisters themselves become in the story carriers of the ambiance of the old South that does not longer exist around them. Nevertheless, one of the them, Isabella, wants to be forward thinking and liberate herself from constrains of an old South that represents hatred, fear and racism, but Maud, the eldest, simply cannot process the new. Not letting go of the old myths is distancing these two women, who only have each other: "Now Isabella thought about her sister's hairnets wadded up in her drawer like little bundles of spiderwebs. They were too gossamery to wash." In this metonymy, the overused nets substitute Maud, representing the frailty of the old myths, which cannot be "washed," cleaned away from sins, nor recycled. And yet, there is love in Isabella's thought. The words chosen to describe the nets do not only carry negative connotations. There is delicacy and delight in the description. This combination of rejection of and attraction towards the South, and the duality of disintegration and perdurability of southern myths characterizes Mason's South blurring in postmodernity.

Blurring Literary Myths

13 Regardless of the fact that postmodernity, postmodernism, and southern literature are all terms that have already been mentioned in the previous section, the present

argument does not entertain absolute literary categorizations in the case of Bobbie Ann Mason. Jean Baudrillard claimed: "America is neither a dream nor a reality. It is hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (28). This postmodern America does not fully work as a theoretical starting point for Mason's short stories, even though simulation and consumption are present in her books; however, her characters are still able to differentiate those from reality. Even if Mason writes about the confusion of postmodernity, her characters do not completely lose touch with their environment. Neither do these characters believe in an American utopia because they question its values even if they need reassurance. In the humorous piece "Tweeting *War and Peace*," written in the form of a conversation in collaboration with the writer Meg Pokrass, the two authors ironically play with the concepts of literary canon and the inclusion of technology. Mason writes "Nobody is reading anything long. That's why there is no twittering chez Hemingway." To what Pokrass answers: "Someday all will see so clearly how great novels like *War and Peace* could have been accomplished in tweets." The significance of their amusing portrayal of the social network Twitter encapsulates the cynicism with which some of Mason's characters process established ideas or timelessness in general. Sarcastically, the two writers question whether Tolstoy's or Hemingway's novels can be posted on the Internet in the form of 140-character messages. Similarly, the postmodern South leaves room for skepticism but in Mason's stories there is a limit to satire and incongruity.

14 Overall, Baudrillard's postmodern "hyperreality" does not collocate with Mason's lyrical approach to the crudities of the South. Her poetic prose comes closer to other styles. Thus, regardless of Mason's interest in postmodernity as subject matter and her acceptance of the postmodern identity crisis, I would like to consider imagism[2] as a writing influence. It makes emotions visible for the reader, using a direct narrative. Imagists represented a subject without distorting it with complicated language. However, the sensorial connotations of the words chosen are important in order to ensure an aftertaste; that is, a post-reading reverberation of the image portrayed. Additionally, and in connection with imagism, I want to now contemplate the relevance in Mason of minimalism,[3] which is a subgenre of postmodernism. In minimalism, all subjects are accepted, regardless of their place within the canon of beauty. Additionally, sparse language coexists with microscopic descriptions and banal details in order to build an accurate environment. Finally, a branch of minimalism, dirty realism[4], also called K-mart realism, is also relevant in Mason. Here characters come mainly from working class sectors of the population, absorbed by consumerism and popular culture. Modernism, imagism, postmodernism or minimalism are all absolute labels that, in my view, escape the liminal reality of Bobbie Ann Mason's characters and yet all, in some aspects, emerge in her stories.

15 Mason's recent interest in flash-fiction or micro-fiction is very useful to illustrate this combination of styles. In the fall of 2015, she published two brief pieces in Frederick Barthelme's online journal *New World Writing*. One of them, entitled "Falling", is written in short phrases and sentences, at times in paragraphs of only one sentence. It is the "synopsis" of a day in the life of the narrator, whose husband, George, has fallen from a ladder in the porch of their farmhouse and broken a leg. She is now in charge of chores and a full-time care-provider: "Dulled by oxycodone, George lolled in his easeful new electric chair, so far away from me, strung up like a man on a rack. Rain, rain today.

Momentary hail. Going out to look for the dead tree, to see if it has surrendered to the earth." This wife is overwhelmed and scared, but these feelings are not explicitly mentioned. Real objects and elements of the landscape are juxtaposed to create an emotive image through the concrete. The interrelation between the robotic movements of the electronic recliner, the drugs, the hail and the dead trees is not explained. However, the falling dead trunks in the nearby forest, George's immobile limb and the hurling frozen rain convey her sense of entrapment: symbols of strength are falling—her husband and her trees—and the weather keeps her indoors. Like William Carlos Williams in *Paterson*, Mason in not talking to the reader using abstract ideas but objective reality: "–Say it, no ideas but in things–" (6). Thus, Mason approaches imagism and minimalism, while introducing elements of K-mart realism, in this case, the reference to morphine, creating a stylistic combination that more accurately represents the multidimensional southernness of her characters.

16 For this reason, I would not attach a single label to Bobbie Ann Mason, instead I read her stories from the perspective of combined styles, which could be called "K-Mart imagism," because her minimalistic tales approach imagism as they do not "tell" but "show." Her lyrical realism of "less is more" contains intense imagery that transforms material spaces into metaphorical spaces. Objects are described with precision, the land is mapped out on the page in detail, but the writer integrates simple tropes within the literal to suggest symbols to the reader. Thus, so far, not only the North and South opposition and the concept of southernness have become a myth in Mason, but, literary labels also, become uncertain, like misconceptions, and so, myths. She writes from a realistic prism, trying not to lose readers in a labyrinth of linguistic puzzles and abstract metaphors. Her characters are down to earth, they struggle with change but not chaos, and the narrative arch remains coherent. However, using Maver Igor's conception of contemporary southern literature—which is close to Mason's in structure, style and themes—these texts can be labeled as postmodern due to their "intergenre" nature, in this case, and from my point of view, "K-mart imagism", mixing postmodern writing with traits of traditional southern novels, "preoccupied [still] with old myths, stereotypes, history and, above all, the locale" (43). Therefore, even though Mason's tropes and language resemble the ordinary lives of contemporary Kentucky, the lyrical beauty and attention to the presence of memory, introspection and imagination prove that postmodernism (like other labels) as Gerhard Hoffmann explains "is not a stable entity but changes in time" (35). In the same way myths change, transmitted orally by storytellers.

17 The myths of this South in transition, as seen through the eyes of postmodernity, influence Bobbie Ann Mason's fictional context and technique, and, more importantly, favor the short story form. This is what the author says about her characters and the plots in an interview with Mervyn Rothstein:

> I feel that my characters are on the threshold of possibility [...]. Their lives are being changed, and they're very excited by it. They're getting a chance maybe for the first time in their lives to get somewhere and to prove something and to do something. Many of my characters are caught up in the myth of progress; from their point of view it means liberation, the promise of a better life.

18 The "myth of progress" that forever equally threatens and excites the South can function as a useful base for short stories. The intensity of the postsouthern can only be maintained for a certain period of time when used as setting. Within this pool of strong emotions, the writer needs to integrate moments of clarity. This passionate component

is thus combined, and so contained, with the simplicity of unrefined realism. In her short piece "The Missing Plane," the narrator is enjoying the excitement of TV news reports: "How thrilling, exhilarating. We do love a mystery. [...] All the reenactments and the simulations." These sentences and clauses are short, the links between them are not explicit and the language is plain. In this way, Mason portrays the narrators yearning for stimulation and change. The rhythm is fast like short breaths, emulating action, while, actually, the narrator is a mere spectator wanting, she says, "dopamine hits," while sitting on a sofa. In this South of postmodernity there is not only the aforementioned constant re-productions, but also a permanent desire of transformation, and, simultaneously, there is an underlying paralysis and Mason's use of rhythm in her short stories reflects this combination.

19 This awareness of permanent change makes characters feel the need to be prepared for immediate reaction, being able to rely only on the present moment. The postsouthern temporal uncertainty is then solved by writing in terms of opposites: details and gaps, noise and silences, which are all interspersed rapidly. In this manner, Bobbie Ann Mason faithfully transmits the exhilaration of postmodern metamorphosis and also emphasizes, with this rhythm, the insecurity of her characters. The key for this cadence is popular culture, and not only the most commonly used forms such as pop and rock, advertisement or television. Mason has kept up with the times, including l the current digital world, like in the previous example of Twitter, and experimenting with flash fiction. In the latter, she takes the brevity of the short story to the extreme to reflect the post-postmodern issue of attention deficit, caused by the digital invasion. In her piece "Ready," published in November 2014, Bobbie Ann Mason depicts a chain conversation on the online social platform Facebook. The writer imitates the format of social media dialogues, including the time the comments were posted, and the number of times someone has clicked the icon "like" to demonstrate approval or support. Two women and a man discuss the skills of the actor Hugh Laurie. They disagree. The discussion starts when one of the women shares a quote by the actor. One of the women explains the meaning of the actor's words: "It was a parody of indecisiveness." So the microfiction piece is a parody within parody of postmodern difficulty with settling conversations, establishing meanings, and creating absolutes. The dialogue itself is made of quotes—isolated speeches left alone until a lagged answer is posted—but there is no conclusion.

20 This piece brings up the absurdity of instant messaging and of the constant flow of virtual information the characters are subjected to in Mason's latest publications. Digital texting takes minimalism as the norm as the words of the "speaker-typer," so to say, are limited to a number or else will not be posted, and hence, will not exist. Thus, identity in the digital South depends on others' employment of one's posted words. Hence, being reposted or shared, liked or ignored determines the relevance of one's speech. This reactive and rapid pace of digital popular culture and communication favors the short story form, not only for its focus on concision, but also because an attempt to save words without losing part of the meaning requires careful linguistic and poetic modulation. Viorica Patea calls this trait of the short story "the aesthetics of economy." She explains that "with its elliptical, metaphoric and metonymic discourse, the short story's brevity generates a heightened sense of concentration, compression and intensity, [...] leading to an increased emphasis on aesthetic stylization" (13). The concision imposed by the aforementioned social media creates fragmented dialogues of

high intensity that prove useful mimicries of the broken communication present in the digital world, which, in turn, serves the stylistic purpose of short fiction.

21 Ultimately, Mason's latest publications are a sign of her adaptation to the South beyond postmodernity. This digital South perpetuates the anesthetic effect of the intermittent presence of postmodern media, advertising and popular culture that has always been part of her short stories. The interaction of the characters with the visual and aural distractions of postmodernity numbs their sense of disconnection. The resulting cognitive overload is captured effectively in microfiction as it works on the principle of what Marc Botha calls "sublime intensity." That is, literature that portrays the current social "need for simultaneous intensification and acceleration" (216). Bobbie Ann Mason depicts a South that is experienced in fragments, with constant interruptions that make difficult for characters to produce a continuous train of thought. Their ideas jump rapidly between concepts, concerns, emotions and perceptions. This is an effect of postmodern imposed speed, and postmodern reveries need to occur in these conditions.

22 Hence, the fanciful moments found both in Mason's conventional short stories and her most recent flash fiction accept the permutable character of this reality; as Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman states in postmodernity "ambivalence is endemic and incurable" (xiv). Mason reflects this instability in her writing letting her characters' fantasy demonstrate the fusion between people and popular culture, as well as the speed with which humans are capable of processing the interruptions of the outer world and integrate them into their thoughts. In her piece of microfiction "The Girl in Purple," published in *The New Flash Fiction Review* in 2014, the character Denis Moore[5] sits at a café and observes a lady dressed in purple. He would like to approach her and introduce himself but his thoughts unstoppably wonder and his stream of consciousness, almost illogical, gets in the way of action:

> The Auguste Macke poster of "Promenade 1913" above his mantel. Andy Kaufman wrestling women in the videos he had watched. Lisbeth Salander with the dragon tattoo. The nutrition facts on the back of the granola bar in his pocket. The girl in purple was coughing. She paused on the Promenade and coughed repeatedly. Something had gone down the wrong way. He knew the feeling.

23 The digressions of the character illustrate Mason's awareness both of postmodern reveries, as well as of the literary experimentations required to stylistically portray with realism the accelerated and unstructured rhythm of a sensitive observer in a scene of postmodernity. His mind is capable of equally reflecting on highbrow knowledge, in the case of the 1913 painting of the German Expressionist, as well as the 2005 bestselling crime novel by Swedish writer Stieg Larsson. Additionally, his fancy contemplates the current dietary concerns encouraged by science, education and advertising. This multiplicity of sources of curiosity for the character elaborate on the myth of postmodernity and the myth of the short story form. Fragmentation is at the core of both myths, and Mason is adapting them to the reality she is nowadays observing around her, projecting, in this case, on Denis Moore's imagination the complex postmodern paradigm.

Solace amidst the Myth of Postmodernity

24 At this point in the discussion, it can be concluded that Bobbie Ann Mason is not postmodern in every sense, but she definitely writes about postmodernity, in this case the "postsouthern."[6]; her characters are not cynics but neither romantics, and her language is minimalistic but marked by images. And, in fact, the power of her imagery brings coherence in style and theme to her resistance to absolutes and labels. This visually descriptive language provides a key for understanding Mason's relation to the postsouthern. The frequent laconism of her characters makes room for the narrator to give an account of where the gaze and bodies of these characters are placed. The contemplative passages and their strong sensorial accuracy result in a quiet and thoughtful survey of the surroundings that soothes the overwhelming effect of postmodern stimulants. "There is no room for silence and inactivity in the postmodern world. Commercialism prods us to always be in motion [...]. We yearn (often unconsciously) for transcendence amidst the malaise and fragmentation of postmodern life" (Davis and Womack 163). Thus, through the sensorial, Mason is providing a silent shelter from postmodernity.

25 That is, in fact, how she has always perceived the world; in her memoir *Clear Springs*, Mason explains that growing up, sounds "had shapes"; she "assigned a visual language to the sounds" she heard before she could read (38). The lasting impression of sounds in young Mason testifies to her acute sensory interaction with the South. In fact, for her, her narrators and characters, this close connection with surroundings often activates synaesthesia, when senses stimulate each other, which in turn provides Mason's stories with perceptual accuracy. And she admits that even now, as a writer, the written word is a "subtitle" to the image (38); that is, in her fiction, the image is the most relevant aspect to portray, as well as accents, and any other aspect of language that may add physicality, flavor or color to the words.

26 In her story "The Face Lady" (2014), a Kentucky aspiring actress living in L.A, Melanie, is offered a role in a reality show in China. Her best friend Susan has cancer but Melanie, who is also the narrator, cannot confront the situation and visit her. This avoidance makes Melanie feel guilty and she imagines a possible chat with Susan in her head while she walks on the beach before leaving for a radical life change. "*Do the line again. Say it like you meant it*"—she says to herself as if it were a script. Then, reality comes to the forefront of the story: "There are lizards at my feet, slithering into a tangle of seaweed. I am silent, a flood of memories shoving me down like the approaching surf." All the senses of the reader are activated in these brief lines, where movement, textures, sounds or their absence, colors, smells, are all contained in the selection of words. There is juxtaposition—the tide and her memories with Susan. Her guilt, and the power of her recollections are felt because they are associated with the waves in the shore. Her fear to leave L.A can be linked to the sticky seaweed entangled in her toes. She stops the fantasy dialogue to feel, and in her silence, the descriptions of the setting help the reader experience the narrator's sensorial perception. This becomes a more effective translation of emotions onto the page, rather than complicated tropes and complex sentence structures. The forms or shapes created by the sensorial terminology provide the story with a deeper meaning that goes beyond the literal minute detail. The objects that bring focus to these images accumulate meaning through the action of reading. As the story unfolds, the writer creates a

referential chain that links images throughout, so that when the final projection is created, the reader perceives the underlying message of the story, sawed together like a quilt—which is, paradoxically, a southern myth.

27 This sensorial strategy, which can bring meaning in a life of fragmentation, is the one followed by the character Scott in Mason's story "The Caretakers," published in 2016 in *The Iowa Review*. Scott and his wife Donna are on the verge of divorce amid repeated discussions and even physical aggression. However, they have been offered a summer job as caretakers of a wealthy couple's hacienda in California. The Southwest in this story is a frontier that seems as distant from the characters' home in Kentucky as the border with the North. Surrounded by luxury, momentarily, Scott and Donna act as if they could still be happy together, but the traumatic experience of their last violent fight comes to the surface: "In the sun, Scott could see clearly the place on her scalp where he had hit her with her vanity mirror two months ago. He hadn't meant to do it, but after that, something was gone between them." Communication is broken between them and the horror of the aggression is omnipresent, literally in the form of a scar, and metaphorically in their unspoken pain. In this scene they are in the garden of the hacienda and they have found old cat prints on a square of concrete. The mark on the floor leads the character and the reader to the mark in Donna's scalp. Scott cannot articulate his guilt and fear so he resorts to the senses: "He touched the spot, but she did not flinch. She was still running her fingers over the grooves of the cat tracks." Donna does not react to his touch. She seems passive when reminded of the trauma. But the action of feeling the cat tracks soothes her sense of broken identity, either through quiet distraction or silent contemplation.

28 The strong imagery, as a constituent of Mason's literary strategy, functions as a materialization of the narrators' and characters' fancy. For instance, in the aforementioned "The Face Lady," after looking at the lizards in the sand, the narrator fantasizes with music and animals: "No doubt the dolphins out there are singing 'Home Sweet Home'." Her sick friend, Susan, was from Kentucky like her; they explored the West and the big city together. The dolphins are melodramatic reminders of her failure to support her friend during this terrible illness, but it also reminds her of where she started from, just in a moment when she is about to cross new frontiers and escape even further away from her original South. This lack of stable identity, swinging back and forth from the South, becomes apparent in Mason's characters' disassociation between their prolific imaginative productions and their intermittent paralysis when life requires determination and acceptance of mutation. In the case of the actress in "The Face Lady," she is unable to talk to her friend, but her imagination is constantly fruitful, capable of creating fictional dialogues in her head. In these enduring contemplative states of apparent paralysis, which is such in terms of action but not mentally, these individuals long for independence and for experiences freed from the folkloric burden of the South, the looming myth. The "singing" dolphins, for instance, chase the actress, reminding her of home, while she prepares to leave for Asia; and the quiet shore loudly reminds her of present solitude and isolation.

29 Graham Clarke studies Raymond Carver's ability to combine the skills of introspection and empathy in his characters by means of "an absolute precision of attention: of the eye registering the minutest details in order to sense the terms of another's existence" (104-05). The parallelism with the observant silences found in Mason's stories is clear, as she uses them to rescue southerners from the postmodern blurring line between

individuality and lack of connection. In this liminal space, the writer needs more than a verbal device to portray a realistic bond between characters in a postmodern scenario, because, as T.E. Hulme[7] said: "Language [...] only expresses the lowest common denominator of the emotions of one kind. It leaves out all the individuality of an emotion as it really exists and substitutes for it a kind of stock or type emotion" (Gage 27). Quietness and fancy bring solace to the characters in this postmodern limbo where people struggle to feel unique among mass culture and globalization, while constantly attempting to establish relationships, build alliances, and experience a sense of belonging. The latter is further complicated in the hectic rhythms of postmodernity. Nancy in the story "Nancy Culpepper," "searche[s] the murky sky, feeling that the two of them [her husband and herself] were lone travellers on the edge of some outer-space adventure. At the same time, she kept thinking of her parents at home" (176). She enjoys the fulfilling sense of independence having escaped her hometown. Nevertheless, these anchoring recollections prevent her from an actual detachment. The outer-space, the freedom away from the borderland and the myths of the South, is close and yet unreachable. This elaborate identity crisis cannot be articulated in dialogue or explicitly; instead, a simile is needed for the sensorial to transmit the message in the name of the character. The couple can be pictured in the infinite gloom of the universe, as a symbol of elation and freedom. However, the anchor of the South pops up in her mind, interrupting her illusion.

30 In Bobbie Ann Mason's stories, these simple tropes bring physicality to the abstract. The southerners in these tales feel isolated in the liminal space of postsouthern uncertainty. A recurrent metaphor in Mason's stories is hence the indivisible bound with the South and the unfeasible freedom from it. In the story "The Rookers," the characters try to understand the nature of photons: "'If you try to separate them, they disappear. They don't *exist* except in a group. Bob says this is one of the most *important* discoveries in the history of the world'" (28). The explanation can very well function as an allegory of Mason's employment of the concept of nostalgia, counterposed to the eagerness to overcome the southern border. That is, if the selfhood of a southerner is extrapolated to an isolated environment, away from its roots, out of reach from the familiar, recollections and local history, it will, most likely, disintegrate, like photons.

31 Hence, Mason's characters at times feel stationed in the center of the floating signifier of southern postmodernity, lonely, confused and overstimulated. Here they struggle to compose a sense of identity through the available blurred social and cultural projections formed in the threshold between North and South. Stylistically, this equally becomes apparent as "Mason's use of the present tense in the majority of her stories serves as the expression of this trapped condition [...]; the moment stilled and isolated from the past and future is yet emblematic of them both, of the gray ongoingness of things" (Moore). Even though the focus of this article is placed on short stories, I would like to briefly comment on Mason's novel *In Country*, where the teenager protagonist's mood is described in the following manner as she leaves her hometown: ''Sam likes the feeling of strangeness. They are at a crossroads: the interstate with traffic heading east and west, and the state road with north-south traffic. She's in limbo, stationed right in the center of this enormous amount of energy" (17). Being an alien is rendered positively and yet, at the frontier, the inbetweener resides in a limbo, where her background becomes oblivious to her existence, whilst the synergy created by the encounter of possibility blocks her ability to act.

32 Like Nancy in the previous example, Sam turns away from the South, but the South pulls her back. This liminal space, however, where the North, the South of Postmodernity, roots and dreams all conflate, does not only trigger confusion; it equally excites the characters. The border, the crossroads, the intersection, these are all icons of the uncertainty of the postsouthern context. Therefore, the unsettling qualities of the unknown are equal to its soothing effect. This is because Mason's characters always have desires. They might be stagnant due to a lack of action, but their aspirations continue. In the story "Clubbing," a widow, Joyce, is hosting her young niece and a friend. The girls are getting ready for a night out, and jokingly comment on Joyce's passé customs, obviously bringing a taste of the old South to the scene. Joyce recalls driving her latest husband Bob to treatment sessions to the hospital when he got cancer: "he was so stoic, so quiet, as if speaking would be impolite." Back then, language was an unsuccessful tool to relate to the world. In the present moment, in front of the energy of youth and the girls' condescending comments on her old-fashioned lifestyle, she shifts from traumatic memories to a daydream state. At that moment, the character is quiet and her mind projects imaginary scenes where the senses take over. And so, Joyce switches from the memory of her cremated husband to the following illusory picture of her young niece Cassandra in a night out:

> Cassandra told me that at a club the young people are packed so closely together they are almost swimming. There is no talking, just squealing and shouting. I visualize them like desperate fish in a tank, swimming in circles. I'm imagining the young bodies, dripping with sex, barely clothed, moving all against each other in a rapid rhythm, like a large group making a toast, raising the glass and then everybody touching everybody's glass. Maybe that is how they are dancing, all swimming, slippery together in the water. It is a thought too delicious to bear.

33 Skin, perspiration, movement, smells, sounds, but no words, create a scene of arousal. Joyce realizes about the lack of excitement in her daily life, and so, she awakens her senses using the presence of the new South brought by Cassandra. This is the fanciful creation that soothes Joyce in her unprocessed trauma. Trauma for Joyce lies in nostalgia, while excitement is found in the future generations of southerners. But she stands in the middle.

34 The fact that accepting their existence in the border and in permanent change eventually contain positive connotations is not surprising, because Mason's characters will vanquish the trapping myth of their cultural artifacts and southern identity by disentangling themselves from the fixation with the border. Because: "The dynamics of mythmaking suggest that resolution of the nation's dilemmas cannot be accomplished by clinging doggedly to its old myths–but also that rediscovery of their core of nobility could yet result from the contemporary turbulence caused by pressures from without and revolt from within" (Gaston 246). These are the revolts performed by Bobbie Ann Mason's characters; even if these are brief, or fail to work as climax in the stories. They will still pursue all objections to limitations, without being defeated by postmodern apathy.

35 Notwithstanding the struggles caused by the fragmented and rushed identities of the South growing in postmodernity, the upcoming conclusion reached by Bobbie Ann Mason's character and first person narrator in the story "Underground", Donna, summarizes why her characters will continue to challenge myths, embracing courage to overcome the postsouthern uncertainties, in a quest to regain the ownership of her cultural identity, which is simple and yet rich. Donna is taking anti-depressants. Her

husband has left her and her two teenage children have moved to California with their father. She has stayed behind in Kentucky. Now she is testing herself, experimenting through simple gestures and also significant adjustments, from a new recipe or a new tan, to new bars and a new boyfriend. Towards the end of the story, she ponders her changes, connecting her body to the present moment, and creating a metaphor in her mind: "I breathe deeply, as if to reach my buried feelings. Some strange woman has been superimposed on me, like a beauty mask that has to be peeled off. But it occurs to me that underneath there may be something beautiful." Southernness is diversity, development, tradition and stories. Myths are masks for communities and cultures, while beauty, identity and originality resides underneath. Bobbie Ann Mason finds aesthetics on both sides of the myth, and both sides of the border. The anxieties and the excitement of postmodernity are capable of being sources of inspiration for the writer and the characters, as long as the myth is reconquered in the awareness found through the senses and in silence.

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NOTES

1. "Kentuckians had ties to both the North and South. The tobacco, whiskey, snuff, and flour produced in the state were shipped to Southern and European markets via the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and to the Northern cities by rail. Losing either of these markets because of war would be a blow to Kentucky's economy. Politically, Kentucky was proud of its role in preserving the Union [...] Kentucky was a source of slaves for the cotton plantations in the lower South, and the slave trade was a very profitable business for many Kentuckians. However, most Kentuckians did not own slaves. Those who did were wealthy plantation owners who stood to lose a lot if slavery were abolished" ("Antebellum Kentucky").

2. Scott Ashley explains in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* that the term "imagist" was seemingly coined by poet Ezra Pound in 1922. Ashley explains that imagists avoided superfluous words, abstractions and artificial rhythms (261).

3. Robert C. Clark defines this literary trend as follows: "The core idea that differentiates American minimalism from other movements is that prose and poetry should be extremely efficient, allusive, and implicative. [...] Because authors tend to use few words, each is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance. Allusion and implication by omission are

often employed as a means to compensate for limited exposition, to add depth to stories that on the surface may seem superficial or incomplete" (1).

4. In the 1983 issue of the literary magazine *Granta*, writer and editor Bill Buford described this particular style: "It is] devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture—and it is entirely appropriate that its primary form is the short story and that it is so conspicuously part of the American short story revival. But these are strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafés, cashiers in supermarkets, construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys. They play bingo, eat cheeseburgers, hunt deer and stay in cheap hotels. They drink a lot and are often in trouble: for stealing a car, breaking a window, pickpocketing a wallet. They are from Kentucky or Alabama or Oregon, but, mainly, they could just about be from anywhere: drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism.

5. The name Denis Moore could be a reference to a character created by one of the BBC series of the British comedy group Monty Python. Their productions tended to play with language and nonsensical and surreal sketches. This connection would emphasize the story's interest on a mind that cannot settle and an environment filled with stimuli.

6. The term was coined by Lewis P. Simpson in 1980, delineating the beginning of the unavoidable self-awareness undergone by the southern individual submerged in cultural and social artifacts in the ever-changing postmodern reality. In an interview with Craig Gholson in 1989, Mason emphasizes the relevance of these postsouthern features: "I write about how people are dealing with their relationships in the face of the phenomenal swirl of change going on in this world [...] I feel that there's a lot of energy emanating from these characters, because they're not jaded. They're not really disillusioned yet. A lot of them are holding onto the tag end of the American Dream."

7. English Imagist poet and critic (1883-1917).

ABSTRACTS

Bobbie Ann Mason dépeint un Sud qui s'articule encore autour de la division Nord/Sud, tout en étant entouré d'espaces de liminaux postmodernes. Le concept de « sudité » devient dans ce contexte un mythe qui ne parvient pas à inclure les complexités des personnages du Kentucky de Mason. Cette article tente d'illustrer la manière dont le passé se manifeste dans les localités, la langue et les identités du Sud qui s'inscrivent également dans des contextes post-sudistes. Mason crée des histoires qui confrontent les mythes culturels et formels afin de représenter avec précision la nature contrastée du Sud qu'elle décrit avec une profonde de fierté et un certain optimisme sans pour autant en idéaliser les racines.

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